

# News Release



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Contacts: Barbara Maxfield, USFWS, 808 541 2749  
Jolie Wanger, DOFAW, 808 587 4188  
Christina Simmons, ZSSD, 619 685 3291

## Biologists Begin "Last Ditch Effort" to Save the Po'ouli

In a desperate attempt to save the rarest Hawaiian forest bird, a team of biologists will fly into Hanawi Natural Area Reserve on Monday to begin an effort to capture and bring into captivity the last three po'ouli known to exist in the world. After years of work to reduce the threats to the species in the wild, and an effort last year to translocate a female into the male's territory, state and federal biologists agree bringing the birds into captivity offers the best remaining opportunity to establish a breeding pair.

"Saving the po'ouli is without a doubt a tremendous challenge," said Paul Henson, field supervisor for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Pacific islands fish and wildlife office. "Our hopes and prayers go with this team into some of the roughest terrain in Hawaii. We have no guarantees we can save the species, but we have to try."

The stocky little bird with a black mask is part of the Hawaiian honeycreeper family, but so unique it occupies its own genus. It is the only Hawaiian forest bird to rely heavily on native tree snails as its food. Despite extensive searches, only three birds – a male and two females – have been found in recent years, and all in separate home ranges.

Six 8-day trips into the forest have been scheduled during February and March. All of the birds have been captured at least once in the past. The biologists will first try to recapture the female they moved last year.

After sighting the bird, they will put up a mist net – a fine mesh, almost invisible net – in the vicinity to capture the bird. If successfully captured, the bird will be put into a padded box so that it cannot injure itself. A highly qualified avian veterinarian will be on each trip to evaluate the bird's health and stress levels.

"The protocol we will be following was developed to a large extent during the translocation project last year by the Maui Forest Bird Recovery Project staff," explained Michael Buck, administrator of Hawaii's Division of Forestry and Wildlife. "Although that effort did not result in a breeding pair, it was incredibly important for the knowledge it gave us regarding how a po'ouli may react to captivity. Thankfully, the female captured last year seemed to take it in stride."



If the bird is judged to be healthy and not overly stressed, team members will then hike with the bird to the nearest helicopter landing zone, where it will be picked up and flown with the avian veterinarian to the Maui Bird Conservation Center in Olinda. The facility – like the Keauhou Bird Conservation Center on the Big Island – is operated by the Zoological Society of San Diego.

“Establishing a breeding pair of po’ouli may be the most challenging task we’ve ever attempted,” said Alan Lieberman, avian conservation coordinator for the Zoological Society. “We have successfully bred several Hawaiian bird species, including the ‘alala, puaiohi, and palila, and even reintroduced them into the wild, but to start off with only three birds, all of which are at least 6 years old, just increases the difficulties.

“We had hope these birds could be recovered in the wild,” he continued. “But now we’re running out of time, and we’re committed to management measures to prevent their extinction.”

The elusive po’ouli was not even discovered by modern scientists until 1973, when a group of University of Hawai’i students conducting research on the east slope of Haleakala sighted a bird they had never seen before. It was named “po’ouli,” which means black head in Hawaiian, by Mary Kawena Puku’i, a renowned authority on Hawaiian culture. It has a quiet song “like dripping water” according to biologists, making it much more difficult to hear than more vocal species such as the Maui parrotbill.

“Sadly, fossil records tell us that we already have lost 82 Hawaiian bird species, including 26 since Europeans first visited the islands,” Henson said. “Our challenge is to make every effort possible to save this unique piece of Hawaiian heritage. I believe the effort we are now beginning gives us the best remaining opportunity to do so.”

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**Note to Editors:** Photographs and video of the Po’ouli are available by calling Jolie Wanger of the Division of Forestry and Wildlife (587 4188) or Barbara Maxfield of the Fish and Wildlife Service (541 2749).

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